Dynamic MRI-Based Computer Aided Diagnostic Systems for Early Detection of Kidney Transplant Rejection: A Survey

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Abstract. Early detection of renal transplant rejection is important to implement appropriate medical and immune therapy in patients with transplanted kidneys. In literature, a large number of computer-aided diagnostic (CAD) systems using different image modalities, such as ultrasound (US), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computed tomography (CT), and radionuclide imaging, have been proposed for early detection of kidney diseases. A typical CAD system for kidney diagnosis consists of a set of processing steps including: motion correction, segmentation of the kidney and/or its internal structures (e.g., cortex, medulla), construction of agent kinetic curves, functional parameter estimation, diagnosis, and assessment of the kidney status. In this paper, we survey the current state-of-the-art CAD systems that have been developed for kidney disease diagnosis using dynamic MRI. In addition, the paper addresses several challenges that researchers face in developing efficient, fast and reliable CAD systems for the early detection of kidney diseases.

Keywords: segmentation, registration, DCE-MRI, CAD, kidney, acute renal rejection

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INTRODUCTION

Early detection of kidney rejection is important for clinical management in patients with transplanted kidneys. In the United States, approximately 17,736 renal transplants are performed annually [1] and, given the limited number of donors, transplanted kidney salvage is an important goal. Renal transplantation complications can be divided into six categories [2]: (i) urologic complications (e.g., urine leaks, calculous disease and urinary obstruction); (ii) fluid collections (e.g., urinomas, hematomas, lymphoceles, and abscesses); (iii) vascular complications (e.g., artery stenosis, infarction, arteriovenous fistulas and pseudoaneurysms, and renal vein thrombosis), (iv) neoplasms (e.g., renal cell carcinomas and lymphomas), (v) recurrent native renal disease, and (vi) graft dysfunction (e.g., acute tubular necrosis (ATN), renal rejection, and drug toxicity).

Acute rejection, i.e., the immunological response of the human immune system to a foreign kidney, is the most important cause of renal dysfunction among other diagnostic possibilities. The incidence of renal rejection episodes depends on several factors, e.g., the organ (status), co-morbidities, medication and compliance [3]. Chronic allograft deterioration increases significantly with each acute rejection episode [4]. Consequently, early detection and effective-fast treatment of acute rejection are crucial to preserve a
graft’s function. At present, initial evaluation of renal dysfunction after transplantation is based on blood tests and urine sampling (e.g., plasma creatinine, creatinine clearance). However, these tests provide information on both kidneys together. Also, significant change in creatinine level is only detectable after the loss of 60% of the kidney function [5], which limits the efficiency of such indexes in detecting renal rejection. Nonetheless, biopsy remains the gold standard, but only as the last resort because of its invasive nature that may cause injury to the graft, high costs, and potential morbidity rates. Moreover, biopsy is limited to patients who are not taking any anticoagulant drugs and may lead to wrong estimation of inflammation extent as it relies on few small samples from limited areas to determine the status of the entire organ.

Noninvasive functional assessment of transplanted kidneys has been clinically explored with several imaging modalities. Radionuclide imaging (scintigraphy) is an excellent modality for evaluating graft function, both qualitatively and quantitatively, while screening for common complications. However, due to its limited spatial resolution, functional abnormalities inside different parts of the kidney (e.g., cortex and medulla) cannot be discriminated precisely [6]. Also, radionuclide imaging involves radiation exposure, thereby limiting the applicability of these techniques, especially in monitoring such diseases as ATN or cyclosporine A toxicity [7]. Ultrasound imaging (US) is a relatively cheap and non-nephrotoxic that is usually used in early postoperative period, as well as for long-term follow-up assessment of the transplanted kidney. However, it suffers from low signal-to-noise ratios, shadowing artifacts, speckles that greatly decrease image quality and diagnostic confidence. Computed tomography (CT) is commonly available technology that uses contrast agents. However, information gathered by CT to detect renal acute rejection is unspecific and the contrast agents used still are nephrotoxic. Therefore, currently CT has a limited role in diagnosing acute renal rejection [3]. Although magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) provides excellent morphological information that allowed advanced analysis of renal function, structural MRI lacks functional information. Dynamic contrast enhanced magnetic resonance imaging (DCE-MRI) has emerged as a new noninvasive technique to provide superior information of the anatomy, function, and metabolism of tissue [8]. Advantages of DCE-MRI techniques over other imaging modalities include the lack of ionizing radiation, increased spatial resolution, the ability to provide superior anatomical and functional information, and the feasibility to be used as early as possible (even one day post-transplantation) for the assessment and follow-up of the transplanted kidney. DCE-MRI involves the acquisition of serial MR images with high temporal resolution before, during, and several times after the administration of a contrast agent (e.g., gadolinium) into the blood stream. The gadolinium behaves as a leakage agent, namely it distributes in the extracellular extravascular space, and at short times (up to about 2 minutes) after administration at DCE-MRI, time-intensity curves (TIC) that represent the average intensity of the kidney can be constructed. From these TICs, empirical parameters (indexes) that reflect the delivery of agent to the tissue bed can be estimated (see Fig. 1). In this paper, we will focus on kidney diagnosis using DCE-MRI.

Developing a computer-aided diagnostic (CAD) system for early and noninvasive diagnosis of the kidney is an ongoing area of research interest. A schematic diagram of a typical CAD system for detection of acute rejection using DCE-MRI is shown in Fig. 2. The motion correction step of DCE-MRI times series is a preprocessing
step to compensate for the global and/or local kidney motion. Next, kidney objects are segmented and the functional unit (i.e., cortex) is extracted in order to determine dynamic agent delivery. Finally, perfusion is estimated from contrast agent kinetics using empirical indexes (see Fig. 1) and classification/diagnosis of kidney status is performed using the extracted features. Below, we will overview the related work on renal image segmentation and registration as well as the today’s CAD systems for kidney diagnosis using DCE-MRI.

FIGURE 1: Typical TIC of a DCE-MRI time series data illustrating the transient (peak value, time to the first peak and the initial up-slope) and tissue distribution phases’ parameters that can be estimated and used for diagnosis.

FIGURE 2. Typical computer-aided diagnosis (CAD) system for diagnosis of acute renal rejection. The input of a CAD system is the DCE-MRI medical images.

RENEAL IMAGE SEGMENTATION AND REGISTRATION
Accurate segmentation and registration of dynamic MR renal images is a challenge due to the relatively low signal-to-noise, non-uniform signal intensity over the time series, and kidney deformations caused by gross patient motion, transmitted respiratory and pulsatile effects. Particularly, motion effects can be compensated for by using global and local registration methods. Kidney segmentation techniques can be classified into three main categories: threshold-based, deformable model-based, and probabilistic or energy minimization-based methods.

Threshold-based techniques segments the kidney and its internal structures (i.e., cortex and medulla) by analyzing an empirical probability distribution, or histogram of
pixel intensities in a region-of-interest (ROI). Earlier renal image analysis (e.g., [9–12]) was usually carried out either manually or semi-automatically. Typically, the user defines a ROI in one image and for the rest of the images, image edges were detected and the model curve was matched to these edges. However, this is subject to inter- and intra-observer variability, and valuable information inherent in the DCE-MRI signal intensity time series (sequences) is not used. Additionally, these approaches are very slow, even though semi-automated techniques (e.g., [9, 12]) do reduce the processing time. Giele et al. [13] introduced an approach for the kidney segmentation and registration. First, the kidney contour is drawn manually by the user in a single high-contrast image. Then, the phase difference movement detection (PDMD) method is employed to correct kidney displacements. Their method demonstrated better performance than image intensity matching and cross-correlation; however, the accuracy was about 68%, a manual mask was still required, and only translational motion was handled. De Priester et al. [12] subtracted the average of pre-contrasted images (10 frames) from the average of early-enhanced images (30 frames) and thresholded the resulting difference image to obtain a kidney mask. Objects smaller than a certain size (700 pixels) were removed, and the remaining kidney object was closed using morphological erosion and manual processing. This approach was further expanded by Giele [14] by applying an erosion filter to the mask image in order to obtain a contour at a second subtraction stage. Koh et al. [15] segmented kidneys with the morphological 3D H-maxima transform. Rectangular masks and edge information are used to exclude training data or prior knowledge. Simple thresholding is too inaccurate to segment human organs in DCE-MRI, because these specific regions have similar gray levels distributions.

Evolving deformable boundary methods have been explored as a more accurate means of kidney segmentation. A series of studies on both rats and human subjects [16–19] have been conducted for the registration and segmentation of DCE-MRI. A multi-step segmentation and registration in the study on humans by Sun et al. [16, 17] initially corrects large scale motion by using a gradient-based similarity rigid registration. Once roughly aligned, a high-contrast image is subtracted from a pre-contrast image and a level set approach was used to extract the kidney from the difference image. Then, the segmented contour is propagated over other frames to search for the rigid (rotation and translation) registration parameters. For rat studies [18, 19], a variational level set approach that integrates a subpixel motion model and temporal smoothness constraints was used to find the kidney borders. For segmenting the cortex and medulla, the technique proposed by Chan and Vese [20] was used. Abdelmunim et al. [21] incorporated both image and shape prior information into a variational framework. However, their model did not adequately account for spatial dependencies between the pixels and therefore is quite sensitive to imperfect kidney contours and image noise. Yuksel et al. [22, 23] proposed a parametric deformable model approach for the segmentation of the kidney where the contour evolution was constrained using two density functions. The first describes a shape prior and is constructed using the average signed distance maps of the training samples. The second describes greylevel distribution of the kidney and its background, estimated using an adaptive linear combinations of discrete Gaussians (LCDG) [24, 25]. A similar approach that incorporated shape and visual appearance priors was proposed by El-Baz et al. [26]. Their shape model is constructed from a linear combination of vectors of distances between the training boundaries and their common centroid. The
appearance prior is modeled with a spatially homogeneous second-order Markov-Gibbs random field (MGRF) of gray levels with analytically estimated pairwise potentials. Khalifa et al. [27, 28] proposed a level set-based framework for kidney segmentation. The proposed a stochastic force [29] that accounts for a shape prior and features of image intensity and pairwise MGRF spatial interactions [30, 31]. They employed a two-stage registration methodology using an affine registration to account for the global motion, followed by a Laplace-based approach for local motion correction [29]. Gloger et al. [32] presented a level set-based approach using shape prior and Bayesian statistical concepts for shape probability maps generation. However, the shape prior model in [27, 32] did not impose temporal constraints on kidney segmentation.

The graph cut-based segmentation algorithm by Boykov et al. [33] minimizes an energy function of a temporal MGRF model of intensity curves. The results looked promising, but manual interaction was still required. Rusinek et al. [34] proposed a graph-cut based segmentation formwork to assess functional parameters. Their method employed a rigid registration step to account for the kidney displacements and the approach has been tested on simulated and in-vivo data. Ali et al. [35, 36] used the graph cut-based minimization of an energy functional combining a shape constraint with boundary properties. The constraint was built using a Poisson probability distribution and distance maps. Chevaillier et al. [37] proposed a semi-automated method to segment internal structures (i.e., cortex, medulla, and pelvis) from DCE-MRI time series by using k-means based partitioning to classify pixels according to contrast evolution using vector quantization algorithm. However, it was only tested on eight data sets for normal kidneys, and user interaction was still required. A similar segmentation by Song et al. [38] has only been tested on two MRI data sets, with simulated rotation and translation rigid motion, for one normal and one abnormal kidney. An automated framework proposed by Zöllner et al. [39] assesses renal function by deriving voxel-based functional information from DCE-MRI, the nonrigid image registration compensating for the motion and deformation of the kidney during DCE-MRI acquisitions. A k-means clustering method was used for extracting functional information about different regions of the kidney according to their dynamic contrast enhancement patterns. An automated wavelet-based k-means clustering framework for segmenting the kidneys was proposed by Li et al. [40]. The images were co-aligned using B-splines registration and cross-correlation (CC) cost function and their framework was tested on seven subjects (four volunteers and three patients). Yang et al. [41] proposed a framework for the classification of kidney tissue using fuzzy c-mean clustering. Their framework employed a nonrigid registration step using the demons algorithm [42] and the squared pixel distance as a similarity metric and the squared gradient of the transformation field as the smoothness regularization term.

DCE-MRI BASED RENAL CAD SYSTEMS

Recently, several CAD systems have been proposed to analyze kidney function using DCE-MRI. Farag et al. [43] and El-Baz et al. [44-47] proposed an automated framework for early diagnosis of acute renal transplant rejection. They designed an external energy function to control the deformable boundary evolution that accounts for two density estimations: one for a shape model and the other for gray level distribution estimated using linear combination of Gaussians (LCG) [30, 31, 48]. For local motion correction,
a geometric-based nonrigid registration approach that deforms the kidney objects over a set of closed equi-spaced contours) iso-contours was introduced. The evolution of the iso-contours is guided by an exponential speed function by minimizing the distances between the corresponding pixel pairs on the reference and target iso-contours. Their frameworks was tested on 30 datasets and the evaluation of the kidney status was based on four empirical parameters (peak signal intensity, time-to peak, the slope between the peak and the first minimum (wash-in slope), and the slope between the peak and the signal measured from the last image in the sequence (was-out slope). A similar CAD system was proposed in [49]. They employed a global alignment step based on maximizing a special Gibbs energy function, the perfusion curves were estimated from the whole kidney rather than the cortex, and the system was tested on a larger cohort of 100 patients. A semiautomated approach by Rusinek et al. [34] assessed cortical and medullary functional parameters (renal plasma flow (RPF), glomerular filtration rate (GFR), vascular volumes of the cortex and medulla, and rate of water absorption) using simulated and in-vivo data. Their framework employed an initial rigid alignment (translation only) step followed by a graph-cut based segmentation approach. Zikic et al. [50] evaluated kidney kinetic parameters after motion correction using template-matching based registration and normalized gradient field (NGF), as the contrast-invariant similarity measure. However, the kidney was segmented manually, only the translational motion was considered, and the evaluation of perfusion parameters (plasma volume and tubular flow) was performed visually by trained physicians for 10 data sets of healthy volunteers. Semi-automated evaluation of renal function was explored by De Senneville [51] using rigid registration to handle kidney motion inside a user-defined ROI. The renal cortex was segmented manually, and the GFR was estimated with Patlak-Rutland kinetic model. Their method demonstrated a significant uncertainty reduction on the computed GFR for native kidneys, but not the transplanted ones. Anderlik et al. [52] proposed a framework for quantitative assessment of kidney function using a two-step motion correction and pharmacokinetic modeling. The GFR was estimated from the TICs using the compartment model proposed by Sourbron et al. [53]. Their framework has been tested on 11 data sets. Zöllner et al. [39] employed a nonrigid registration using B-splines and mutual information (MI) as a similarity metric. Functional information was extracted regionally using k-means clustering. This system was tested only on four DCE-MRI data sets and the evaluation of kidney regions was assessed qualitatively according to their mean signal intensity time courses. An automated framework for the classification of kidney transplant status was proposed by Khalifa et al. [27, 28, 54]. In their framework, the kidney was segmented using a stochastic geometrical deformable model approach and the local motion of the kidney is corrected for by a Laplace partial differential equation-based nonrigid alignment method [29]. The system was tested on 26 data sets and the kidney status was evaluated using K-nearest neighbor classifier based on empirical parameters estimated from the agent kidney kinetic curves. Their framework was later extended in [54] by using analytical function-based model to fit agent kinetic curves derived from the cortex rather than the whole kidney as in [27]. For the classification of kidney status, five features (three are derived from the gamma-variate functional model and two are from the perfusion data, namely the time-to-peak and average plateau, see Fig. 1) were chosen, and the study included 50 transplant patients (27 non-rejection and 23 acute rejection). Semi-automated estimation of renal parameters was performed by Hodneland
et al. [55]. A viscous fluid model combined with an NGF-based cost function was used for elastic kidney registration. However, the kidney was segmented interactively with the nearest neighbor approach, the framework was tested only on 4 data sets of two healthy volunteers, and the reported GFR measurements were slightly underestimated relative to the creatinine reference values. Positano et al. [56] proposed a CAD system for the estimation for renal parameters. Their system included a two-step rigid registration framework to compensate for kidney motion using MI and adaptive prediction of kidney position over the course of the respiratory cycle. The perfusion indices (peak signal intensity, mean transit time (MTT), initial up-slope, and time to peak) was evaluated on perfusion curves extracted from the automatically and manually registered datasets were similar as well. However, their registration method could address only the global motion, but not the local motion.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Efficient and reliable CAD systems for early detection of renal transplant complications are very important. This is due to the fact that early detection of renal complications, especially renal rejection, can be potentially increase the quality of a patient’s post-transplant treatment. This paper overviews recent CAD systems for the detection of kidney rejection using dynamic contrast-enhanced magnetic resonance imaging (DCE-MRI), and addresses their strengths and limitations. However, several research challenges and aspects have been facing each stage of the development of accurate and fast CAD systems. These challenges can be summarized as follows:

- Most clinical and research studies focuses on 2D time series analyses that are compatible with data acquisitions for real patient scenarios. However, the extension to 4D (3D + time) is one of the major challenges. The goal of DCE-MRI is to obtain the most feasible temporal resolution, while maintaining good spatial resolution. Therefore, the acquisition of a 3D time series that has a higher spatial resolution greatly affects the temporal resolution, and vice versa. Thus, a compromise in choosing the acquisition parameters for 3D time series (4D) is required to achieve a sufficiently high signal-to-noise ratio, since acquiring ideal rapid isotropic 3D imaging of a moving kidney is not achievable [51].

- Accurate delineation of kidney borders requires new segmentation models to account for the large inhomogeneities in kidneys (i.e., cortex, medulla). This can be achieved by integrating spatial interactions between the kidney pixels or voxels that represent the kidney and the intensity information in the segmentation techniques. Most popular spatial interaction models are MGRF-based methods, using binary maps and pairwise relationships for 2D and 3D images (see e.g., [27, 29–31]). A recent study by Khalifa et al. [28] demonstrated the advantage of higher-order MGRF spatial model over second-order models for kidney segmentation from DCE-MRI. Also, a new trend in medical image analysis is to learn the appearance of the kidney using an MGRF trained on grey-scale images as opposed to binary maps [57–60].

- Motion artifacts present another major challenge for automated analysis of DCE-MRI. Both global and local kidney deformations affect accurate analysis of perfusion data. In literature, a tremendous number of image registration methods have
been proposed to handle both global and local motion in medical images [61]. A new trend to provide more accurate registration is the use of higher-order similarity metrics [62–64]. Unlike other registration methods that are prone to image intensity variations over the time series, other sophisticated methods [27, 44, 54] explicitly depends only on the geometric features to compensate for the kidney motion. These approaches can also be extended to deal with 3D data.

REFERENCES
